

MIRAGE



The University of New Mexico Alumni Association

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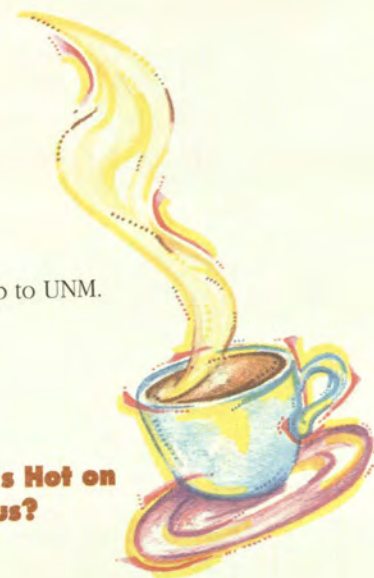
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Author Tony Hillerman
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Cary Herz.

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A



High Stakes Hillerman Style

It's a sure bet. This UNM alum, former journalism department chairman, and best-selling author is a winner.

*by Katharine Beebe
photography by Cary Herz*





K

Consider the odds of a poker player drawing a royal flush.

"They're better," says *Albuquerque Journal* columnist Jim Belshaw, "than doing what Tony Hillerman did." Belshaw ('74 BA) is a Hillerman alum.

What Hillerman did was this:

He has published about a book a year since 1970, sending *numero uno* straight to Harper and Row, written bestsellers (plural), won the Edgar and Grand Master awards—as well as the Silver Spur, the American Indian's Ambassador, and the Navajo Tribe's Special Friend awards—served as past president of the Mystery Writers of America, run the UNM journalism department, and supported a family of eight while refining a self-deprecating sense of humor.

What reader would believe that in a fictional character?

Like poker, publishing today is a gamble with a high-stakes investment of time and sacrifice and the odds stacked against winning—a game of chance.

"Most of the old-line editors who would nurture a new author have disappeared, all bought out by big conglomerates," said magazine writer and six-time author William Buchanan. A Hillerman fishing buddy and poker partner, Buchanan said publishers look for three things: Can they sell a lot of books fast? Can they get good paperback sales? And does the book have movie potential?

"You need to have all three, yes," said Buchanan, who has had three books filmed with a fourth under negotiation. "Old Tony could sell his laundry list."

Hillerman ascribes his success to luck.

"Luck?" says Belshaw. "That's baloney. He just doesn't want to brag on himself."

Raised near Sacred Heart, Oklahoma, during the 1930s dust bowl, Hillerman has said the community was distinguished as the center of the largest area of critical soil erosion in the United States.

In "Mystery, Country Boys, and the Big Reservation," Hillerman wrote:

Funny how you never rid yourself of the psychological baggage you collect as a child. At about nine, I became aware that two kinds of people make up the world. Them and us—the town boys and the country boys.

The town boys got their hair cut in barber shops, knew how to shoot pool, didn't carry their lunch in sacks, wore belt pants and low-cuts instead of overalls and work shoes, had spending money, knew about calling people on telephones, and were otherwise urbane and sophisticated. We

were better rifle shots, better at riding horses, could endure hot hours feeding the hay baler, and until we tried it were better at fistfighting.

Talking Mysteries with co-author Ernie Bulow
UNM Press, 1991

Hillerman attended grades one through eight at St. Mary's Academy, a boarding school for Potawatomie Indian girls. As one of eight or 10 farm boys, he said he learned "how it feels to be a minority problem. You're not a Potawatomie, but you're not a girl and that's much worse."

On Beating the Odds

Just for argument, let's write off luck. What's left in the equation for writerly success?

Inventing a genre doesn't hurt. For newcomers to the planet, Hillerman's protagonists are Navajo detectives who solve mysteries on New Mexico and Arizona reservations.

He met the Navajo this way:

It was ... 1945. I was just back from World War II, a very senior private first class with a patch over a damaged eye and a cane to help a gimpy leg. I had a sixty-day convalescent furlough and I found a job (in ... 1945, anyone alive could find a job) driving a truckload of pipe from Oklahoma City to an oil well drilling site north of Crownpoint on the Navajo "checkerboard" Reservation. Suddenly, a party of about twenty Navajo horsemen (and women) emerged from the piñons and crossed the dirt road in front of me. They were wearing ceremonial regalia and the man in front was carrying something tied to a coup stick.

Talking Mysteries

Another explanation for Hillerman's success might be a long relationship with *story*.

"I think writers like Tony are born and then made," wrote Ernie Bulow in *Talking Mysteries*. "But no amount of hard work will make a writer a great storyteller."

"My mother was a wizard storyteller," Hillerman said. "We had no electricity. The battery radio usually didn't have a charge." So stories marked time.

Hillerman's father, who died when Tony was in his mid-teens, ran a farm and a crossroads store. "People sat on front porches, or on the benches which lined the front of my dad's general store, and told tales.... In Sacred Heart, Oklahoma, being a storyteller was a good thing to be," Hillerman wrote in *Talking Mysteries*.

Even so, book two didn't write itself. (His high school yearbook was book one. He



Q wrote the class history.) Plotting hobbled his first steps as a novelist:

I tried. A few chapters into the book it began sounding like nonsense. Tried again. No better. I decided to design a conclusion and outline from both ends toward the middle. It didn't work. Finally, I put the outline aside. I would write the first chapter, perhaps even a second one, and grow the outline from that. I wrote a first page, rewrote it, rewrote it five more times. Wrote a second page, etc. Finally finished a first chapter. It was a fine, polished first chapter, made up of nicely boned paragraphs, good sounds, metaphors which fit, etc. I still have it somewhere in a manila folder labeled First Chapter.

Talking Mysteries

Almost 20 books later, he still foregoes the outline to rely on instinct.

He sees beyond the obvious and gives voice to what he sees, Belshaw said, noting that unflinching honesty characterizes Hillerman too. He makes writing look easy. Take this essay from *The Great Taos Bank Robbery*: "The Mountain on the Guardrail at Exit 164B." The reader joins the author in the front seat of a car during that "twice-a-day tide of rush-hour traffic" at 5:10 p.m.

On this particular autumn afternoon I drive through the exit with a Cadillac, frantic with hurry, just behind me. To my left a pickup truck wearing its dents like a boxer's scars signals a right turn into my path of escape...

... a convection layer has trapped Albuquerque's bad breath and filled the Rio Grande Valley with smog. Across this gray haze, the ancient volcano floats blue with distance and white with early snow.

The Great Taos Bank Robbery
UNM Press, 1973

Mt. Taylor—or
Turquoise Mountain—
stands on the horizon
oblivious to urban hustle. By

**Like poker,
publishing today
is a gamble with a
high-stakes
investment of
time and sacrifice
and the odds
stacked against
winning—a game
of chance.**

J showing Navajo beliefs about this mountain, Hillerman reveals the first-person character—a man driving home at rush-hour—without describing him. The resulting contrast between mountain and man creates a sense of almost tangible longing.

If you look across the guardrail (the mountain) is there, reminding you of a different world, of silence, and the smell of fir, and the possibility of wild turkey. My map tells me the Turquoise Mountain is 62.7 miles from this noisy

intersection. In another sense, the distance is infinite.

The Great Taos Bank Robbery

A page and a bit and Hillerman's done. He makes weaving this overlay of ideas—which, in and of itself, creates persona and emotion—accessible.

"It dawns on you to look at the dance of language on the page," Hillerman said. "What's left out is as important as what's in."

Another key to success on Hillerman's scale is a work ethic. He works hard with monthly page quotas, Belshaw said.

"I grew up in a depression. Everyone I knew worked all the time. People didn't get a two-week vacation or a two-day weekend," said Hillerman. "My dad worked a 12-hour day and a six-and-a-half-day week. The idea of a 40-hour week

belongs to (a younger) generation. Even now (at age 70) I'm working on a book. I can't conceive of retiring and playing golf. It would drive me crazy."

UNM Journalism Professor Henry Trehwitt, author of a book on Robert McNamera, said dogged persistence is the only route for the author with a full-time job. Before returning to UNM recently, he worked on the *Baltimore Sun* and *U.S. News and World Report* staffs.

"You just have to work and you don't get much sleep," he said of book authorship. "You jam every free moment into the book if you're going to be serious."

Whatever Hillerman's secret is, his success is creating its own stories. Around Albuquerque, two



Hillerman anecdotes have become legend. Whether they're accurate or true is another Hillerman mystery, but they characterize the man. One goes like this:

Early on—say, in his first novel, *The Blessing Way*—an agent says to Hillerman, “The story’s OK, but you ought to take those Indians out.” Twenty-six years later, countless readers know Jim Leaphorn—but right away the agent turned up missing. (Guess she ate her heart out.)

The other’s a Robert Redford anecdote: Apparently Redford, wishing to film a Hillerman mystery, called the author about meeting over dinner.

“Sure,” Hillerman says.

“How ‘bout Tuesday?” says Redford.

“Nope, can’t,” goes Hillerman. “Tuesday’s my poker night.”

On Drawing a Royal Flush

Must be some poker game, huh?

“The game started on a Tuesday night in the fall of 1975. It’s been played every Tuesday night since,” said Belshaw, who recalled a new partner’s comment, “You guys don’t play poker—you play cards.”

Poker-gang member Trewhitt called it “a group of old geezers sitting around joking a lot.”

“It’s absolute mayhem,” said Buchanan. “It’s all irreverent. No one comes in proud and walks away proud. We have the political spectrum from far to the left to far to the right. But it’s highly supportive too—if that makes sense.”

Things happen on these Tuesday-nights that don’t happen in *real* poker, Belshaw said. The game has endured so long and the stakes are so low that no one gets excited. The rules bend. “If you fold, you lean over and see what the other guy’s got. And you tell people how to play,” Belshaw said, adding, “But it got my dining room table into *People* magazine once.”

This game draws writers. Could a poker-playing author use the same skills for cards and words? Maybe a knack for reading people might be such a skill. “Tony’s constantly looking at people as characters,” Belshaw said. “He looks at interactions

“It dawns on you to look at the dance of language on the page.”

Tony Hillerman



from a writer’s point of view.”

Hillerman success, however, delves beyond talent, hard work, a need for income, and a keen eye.

Hillerman believes.

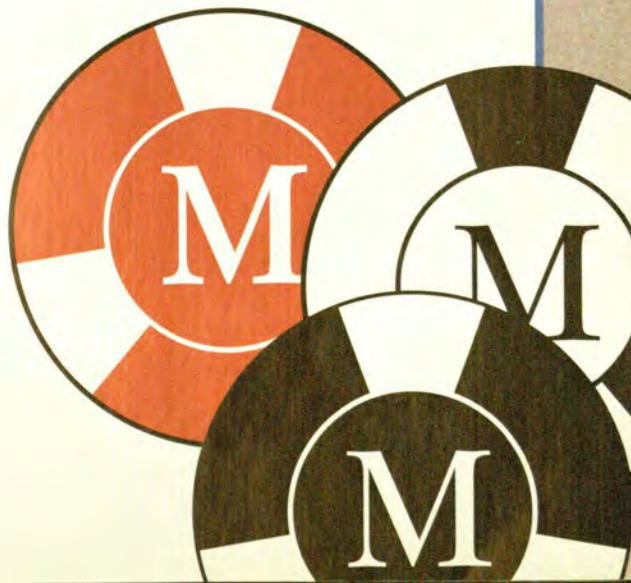
“When we’re fishing and it’s a Sunday, one of the first things he looks for is where the nearest Catholic church is,” Buchanan said. “I’ve seen him leave the river and go to mass.”

“I’m a religious fellow,” Hillerman said. “I believe we were created by a God who loves us and tries to teach us how to live. America’s religion is—well, the Old Testament calls it the god of mammon. We worship the golden calf. This is probably one of the most pagan places on the planet.”

When Buchanan, a Lutheran, and Hillerman, a Catholic, trout-fish together, they talk sometimes about “the meaning of life,” Buchanan said, adding, “His wife and my wife are two of the most religious people either one of us ever met.”

Long before the current wave of Indian wannabes, Hillerman found in Native American cultures a “belief in God strong enough that it affects the way they live,” he said. His mysteries have brought character and reader together from separate worlds. Hillerman novels solve more than plotted mystery. They unravel how people of unlike cultures might acknowledge one another. High stakes for some but the winnings are big.

“Why do you rarely see a Navajo operating a trading post?” Hillerman said. “Because if their kin are hungry, they’d give the stuff to their kinfolks. I admire that.” And now others do too. ♦





The Hillerman Hand

Tony—Anthony Grove—Hillerman came to UNM in 1963 as special assistant to President Tom L. Popejoy. He arrived with Bronze and Silver stars as well as a Purple Heart from World War II.

As former executive editor of *The New Mexican*, Hillerman had been a journalist since 1948. He graduated from the University of Oklahoma with a BA in journalism, then launched a news career in Borger, Texas, on the *News Herald*, before moving to the *Morning News* in Lawton, Oklahoma. There he served as news and city editors.

He came to New Mexico by way of United Press, where he worked from 1950 to 1954 as reporter, radio news editor, state capital reporter, and finally the Santa Fe Bureau chief and New Mexico manager. His next post was *The New Mexican* in Santa Fe.

Among Hillerman's journalistic awards are the New Mexico Press Association 1961 and 1962 E. H. Shaffer awards for best news story and the 1962 E. H. Shaffer award for the best editorial. Hillerman received special honors in Oklahoma for a series reporting corruption in the Emergency Relief Agency; his series led to reforms.

He earned an MA degree in English from UNM in 1964. Beginning in 1965, Hillerman served as a UNM journalism professor—and champion for intellectual freedom for the *New Mexico Daily Lobo*, the UNM student newspaper. He retired in 1987 to write fiction full time.

In February, the UNM Alumni Association honored Hillerman with the 1996 Zimmerman Award to an alum who has made a significant contribution



and brought fame and honor to UNM or the state of New Mexico. Hillerman has further distinguished himself with the following awards:

- ◆ Five times listed on the *New York Times* "Notable Books of the Year."
- ◆ Listed among the American Library Association Best Books for 1970.
- ◆ A special children's book award.
- ◆ The Edgar Award from the Mystery Writers of America.

- ◆ Grand Master Award from the Mystery Writers of America.

- ◆ The Center for the American Indian's Ambassador Award.

- ◆ The Navajo Tribe's Special Friend Award.

- ◆ The Silver Spur Award from the Western Writers of America.

- ◆ The Grand Prix de Littérature Policière Award from France.

The Rhodes Scholar Tour program has named its Southwestern U.S. excursion to Anasazi the "Hillerman Tour." Hillerman's bestsellers include *Sacred Clowns*, *Coyote Waits*, and *A Thief of Time*. His latest publication is *Finding Moon* (HarperCollins Publishers, 1995). Reset in Vietnam, the theme is based on a World War II experience of witnessing a man propelled into chaos. Oxford University Press is slated to publish *The American Detective Story*, a work of nonfiction, this year. ◆

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